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ABSTRACT

To determine whether social studies texts used in the intermediate grades of British Columbia (Canada) schools were easier than those analyzed in a 1974 study, the Fry Readability formula was applied to all the grade 4-7 social studies texts prescribed and authorized for use in 1979-1980. It was found that the British Columbia texts are extremely difficult. The difficulty is indicated by the vast range of difficulty within books, the high average readability of individual texts, and the high mean readability of texts across each grade. Most of the books are appropriate only for gifted readers. They present excessive difficulty for average readers and unsurmountable frustration for below average readers. Only for grade 7 is there a sufficient number of texts of appropriate reading level for most students. (RM)

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AMERICAN AND CANADIAN SOCIAL STUDIES TEXTS - RECENT CHANGES IN READABILITY

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AMERICAN AND CANADIAN SOCIAL STUDIES TEXTS - RECENT CHANGES IN READABILITY

Surveys of social studies texts used in American schools reveal that most texts are too difficult for the reading capacities of the students using them (Devall, 1971; Harris, 1972; Johnson & Vardian, 1973).

In Canada similar results have been reported for social studies texts used in British Columbia elementary schools (Covell, 1965; Pennock, 1974) and in secondary schools (Slade & Wilson, 1973).

The present study was conducted to determine whether social studies texts used in the intermediate grades of British Columbia schools were easier than those previously analyzed (Pennock, 1974). This would parallel a trend toward easier social studies texts in the United States reported by Johnson (1977).

The Study

Fry's Readability Graph (1977) was applied to all the social studies texts prescribed and authorized for use in the intermediate grades of British Columbia schools in 1979-1980. Some results of this analysis are shown in Table 1. It will be observed that there is a very large range of difficulty within each text. Books assigned to grade six, for example, have passages ranging from grade three to grade seventeen, with the most extreme text having

passages ranging from grade six to college level in difficulty. Looking down the column titled "Mean" it will be noted that the difficulty of texts does not differ greatly from grade to grade; the average for grades five, six and seven at approximately grade eight level, with the texts assigned to grade four slightly less difficult, having an average readability of almost grade seven.

Reference to Table 2 discloses that texts added to grade four are slightly easier, although their average readability is grade six. And these books contain passages as difficult as grade nine. Happily for grade four children several quite difficult texts (average difficulty grade eight) were transferred from grade four to grade five!

For grades five and six the readability levels of texts added is approximately that of those used in 1972-1973. For grade seven, however, texts added appear to be considerably more difficult (average grade: 11.8!) than those analyzed in 1974 (average grade: 8.0).

Unlike Johnson's (1977) finding of easier social studies texts recently published for use in the intermediate grades in the United States, this study indicated little change in difficulty levels in books assigned to grades five and six while the readability of grade four books was slightly lower due to the transfer of several difficult books to grade five. The average difficulty of grade seven texts was actually increased since most of the texts added were of extreme difficulty with readabilities grade thirteen to

Table 1

SOCIAL STUDIES TEXTS AUTHORIZED FOR USE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

GRADES FOUR TO SEVEN

1979-1980

SUMMARY OF GRADE MEANS AND RANGES

GRADE	NUMBER OF TEXTS	MEAN	RANGE	TEXT WITH SMALLEST RANGE	TEXT WITH LARGEST RANGE	RANGE MEDIAN
4	5	6.8	3-12	4-5	3-10	2
5	41	8.0	4-13	7-8	4-13	4
6	21	8.1	3-17+	17-8	6-16	4
7	27	8.3	3-17	6-7	5-11	3

Table 2

SOCIAL STUDIES TEXTS AUTHORIZED FOR USE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

GRADES FOUR TO SEVEN

RECENT CHANGES

GRADE		NUMBER OF TEXTS	MEDIAN	RANGE	SMALLEST RANGE	LARGEST RANGE	RANGE MEDIAN
4	Analyzed in 1974	7	7.7	3-13	7-10	4-13	6
	Since Added	3	6.1	4-9	4-5	4-7	2
5	Analyzed in 1974	23	8.1	3-13	7-8	4-13	5
	Since Added	21	7.8	4-13	7-8	4-13	4
6	Analyzed in 1974	11	8.2	3-13	6-10	6-13	6
	Since Added	18	8.1	3-17+	7-8	8-17+	3
7	Analyzed in 1974	28	8.0	3-13	6-7	6-13	3
	Since Added	5	11.8	4-17+	12-15	7-12	4

sixteen.

Reference to Table 3 reveals that social studies texts published in the United States 1973-1976 as analyzed by Johnson (1977) would appear to be of appropriate difficulty for grade six and only slightly (.6 and .8) above grade in readability for grades four and five. Texts added in British Columbia since 1972-1973, however, are two readability grades above the grade for which they have been authorized in grades four, five and six and considerably more for grade seven. Texts added since 1973 are therefore substantially more difficult than texts recently published in the United States, as reported by Johnson (1977).

The question may arise - Does this analysis using Fry's Readability Graph (1977) overestimate the difficulty that these texts present to students in the intermediate grades? The answer would seem to be, No. A check was run applying the Dale-Chall (1949) formula to six books randomly selected from the 1979-1980 list. Estimates were found to run very close to the Fry analysis. The Dale-Chall formula, moreover, would appear to underestimate the difficulty of a book since it was based on a criterion of only 50% comprehension. The Fry Readability Graph (1977) when in error would seem mainly to underestimate difficulty; to be a conservative estimate of difficulty in relation to other measures including the cloze procedure (Thomson, 1978). One can expect the ratings reported in this study, if in error, are too low.

Table 3

THE READABILITY OF INTERMEDIATE GRADE SOCIAL STUDIES TEXTS

CHANGES IN RECENT YEARS

SUMMARY OF GRADE MEANS

GRADE	BRITISH COLUMBIA 1974-1979	UNITED STATES 1973-1976 (Johnson: 1977)
4	6.1	4.6
5	7.8	5.8
6	8.1	6.0
7	11.8	*

* Not reported by Johnson. Grade Seven is not part of the elementary school in most parts of the United States.

Summary

Social studies texts authorized and prescribed for use in the intermediate grades of British Columbia schools are extremely difficult in terms of the vast range of difficulty within books, the high average readability of individual texts and the high mean readability of texts across each grade.

Most of these books are appropriate only for gifted readers, present excessive difficulty for average readers and unsurmountable frustration for below average readers. Only for grade seven is there a sufficient number of texts of appropriate difficulty for most students.

Social studies texts recently added in British Columbia since 1973 have generally, also been of excessive difficulty, and much more difficult than recent American intermediate grade social studies texts as reported by Johnson (1977).

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